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Camp David: Secluded Retreat for Presidents



View of the entrance to Camp David, which is situated in a heavily wooded area in Catoctin Mountains near Thurmont, Md.

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THURMONT, Md.—Among the displays in a corridor showcase in a Thurmont restaurant are what appear to be three pitted billiard balls on a skewer and a faintly yellowed bellpush. They are identified as a fishing float and bedroom buzzer used by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at Camp David.

Passers-by stop to examine other memorabilia—a wooden shingle said to be “from the Presidential retreat” and a signed photograph of President Nixon—as if they were looking at archeological finds, remnants of some second Atlantis that they can only dimly imagine.

That is a fairly accurate description of Camp David's status among all save those few—heads of state, friends and families of Presidents and members of administrations—who have been invited to the camp about 70 miles from the White House.

President Nixon, who is believed to have spent more time there than any of his predecessors, said recently that he would be spending even more time “on top of the mountain”—the Catoctin Mountains, in which Camp David is perched at about 1,820 feet.

Town Seems Unaware

Thurmont, which would be Camp David's mailing address, is a tiny town apparently fairly indifferent to the proximity of power. The souvenir shops sell only the usual gardenia-scented candles, plastic honeysuckle and humorous coffee mugs. Even the local scenic postcards ignore the existence of Camp David.

The road up to Camp David from Thurmont uncoils for seven miles through increasingly thick woods, now winter bare. The 200-acre camp is situated in a national and state park area, part of a 6,000-acre tract purchased by the Department of the Interior in the nineteen-thirties.

The first sign of its existence is a stand of probably electrified fence wire, followed by a formidable double-steel cyclone fence, topped by concertina wire, that surrounds the area.

The President's Camp David residence, Aspen Lodge, is said to be a half-mile or more from the gate. All that



Badge worn by guards at Camp David.

can be seen, except for woods and paths and Marine guards, is the trailer recently installed for the convenience of the press, who previously had the choice of sitting in their cars parked along the side of the road or standing around, whatever the weather.

Helicopter is the preferred mode of travel to Camp David, a 30-minute trip from the White House, and the other building into which the press is sometimes allowed is a green-painted hangar used to house the Presidential helicopter. Since the pad is not visible from the trailer, it is possible for Mr. Nixon's visitors to come and go unobserved.

When Mr. Nixon arrives or departs, or when it is desired that someone's arrival be noted, reporters are allowed closer to the pad, standing in a wooden lean-to shelter called “the Duck Blind.”

All of the camp's buildings, according to the White House press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, are similar one-story board buildings painted a muted moss green. Aspen, the Presidential residence, was said to have been given its present name by Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower.

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The camp, called Shangri-La by its first Presidential occupant, Mr. Roosevelt, was renamed Camp David by President Eisenhower in honor of his grandson, David, who is now married to Mr. and Mrs. Nixon's younger daughter, Julie.

The White House "fact sheet" on the camp does not give details of Aspen's interior, but it reportedly has—or had during President Eisenhower's tenure—four bedrooms and a spectacular view from the glassed-in side of the living room.

Cabins' Décor Similar

The decor in all the cabins is similar, according to Mr. Ziegler — stone fireplaces, heavy exposed beams and a general rustic atmosphere. He concedes, however, that there are "ongoing" renovations of the camp, and it is rumored that it is somewhat more plush than described.

There are 10 residence cab-

ins in all, including Aspen. Four of these—Witch Hazel, Birch, Dogwood and Maple—are "in the immediate vicinity of Aspen." The others, grouped around Laurel, the dining lodge that is also used for small conferences, are named Hawthorne, Walnut, Sycamore, Linden, Red Oak and Hemlock.

There are, the fact sheet says, a heated swimming pool and two tennis courts, two bowling alleys in Hickory lodge, the recreation building, a skeet range and a three-tee golf green.

Except for President Truman and his family, who the fact sheet notes, "seems to prefer the seashore," every President for the last 30 years has enjoyed escaping to the mountain retreat from the formality and visibility of the White House.

The camp was a product of the Depression, one of three model recreation camps built by the Civilian Conservation

Corps and Works Progress Administration.

The initial cost of Aspen Lodge was reportedly \$60,000, and it was designed to Mr. Roosevelt's specifications. A great deal more has been spent on renovating and improving the lodge.

It was in 1942 that Mr. Roosevelt chose what was then called Hi-Catoctin as a Presidential retreat. But its existence and location were not acknowledged until the end of World War II.

Named Shangri-La

It was named Shangri-La by the President after he replied to a question about the location from which the first successful bombing raid on Tokyo—by Gen. James A. Doolittle of the Army Air Forces—was launched with the words "Shangri-La." The name was taken from the popular novel and subsequent film, "Lost Horizon," by James Hilton, which re-

counted the adventures of a group of downed airplane passengers in a remote valley utopia in the Himalayas.

As the Thurmont Restaurant reminds travelers in its advertising, Winston Churchill was among Mr. Roosevelt's visitors, the first of a long stream of dignitaries since then. They have included former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan of Britain, the late President Charles de Gaulle of France and the late Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union. It was Premier Khrushchev's meeting with President Eisenhower there in September, 1959, that gave rise to the phrase "the spirit of Camp David."

President Kennedy used Camp David more for relaxation than business, and members of the family stabled their horses there. Under President Johnson, the heads of state began to arrive once again.

Nixons Visit Often

But it is President Nixon who really seems to have found Camp David a better home than the one on Pennsylvania Avenue. According to the White House, he and his family have spent "on the average of every other weekend" there.

He has worked on many of his major speeches and policy statements there, and worked with the Cabinet and other advisers and with Congressional leaders.

The President has announced that he plans to use Camp David even more extensively—he went there immediately after his re-election and remained there for almost two weeks. This intention has raised some question as to whether it is appropriate to surround what will evidently be a center of government comparable to the White House with the same secrecy as a private, off-duty Presidential retreat.

There is talk that a new and permanent press center will be built, but there is no



White House Photograph

President Nixon outside Aspen Lodge, his residence at the camp, in August.

indication that the camp will be any more accessible.

Back down in Thurmont, the restaurant's menu lists Sir Winston at the top of its list of important people who had eaten there. But the sense of history is less than pervasive. A waitress of appropriate age was asked recently what Sir Winston had had to eat. "I don't know," she said matter-of-factly. "I haven't been working here that long."